

AFGHANISTAN: NATION OR NARCO STATE

BY

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AFGHANISTAN: NATION OR NARCO STATE

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ABSTRACT

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Afghanistan is at a turning point in its future, Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of opium and recent reports indicate that production in 2006 has set a new record. To reverse the historically recent explosion of Afghan narcotics, it will require nothing less than the usurpation and supplanting of the autonomous tribes and their warlords with a strong, central authority, something which has never truly existed in Afghanistan. With the waning and elimination of national coercive capacities in Afghanistan during the twentieth century, be they colonial or communist, social forces at the tribe level became unleashed. A functional national government will need to provide both a coercive, as well as a socially-supportive force throughout the country, not just in Kabul. The future of Afghanistan will be determined by its ability to control the trafficking and production of drugs. It will be these factors that will decide if Afghanistan will be a viable nation or a narco-state.

AFGHANISTAN NATION OR NARCO STATE

“Today, I thank God for letting us get a harvest this year”, said Gul Agha, a farmer in Helmand province who harvested 90 kilograms of raw opium in May 2006. Afghanistan is the world’s largest producer of opium and recent reports indicate that production in 2006 has set a new record. According to UNODC (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime), opium cultivation covered an estimated 165,000 hectares in the 2005/2006 growing season, a 59 percent increase on the previous season. UNODC estimates that opium production rose from 4,100 metric tons in during the 2005 harvest to 6,100 metric tons in 2006, representing 92 per cent of world production. Various reasons for this drug escalation have been portrayed; however, the principal causative and influential component in Afghanistan’s rapid rise to international opiate leader is tribalism.

Having its intense roots in the country’s historical and ethnographic background, tribalism was then annealed by various warlords attempting to solidify and expand their regional, ethnic and tribal autonomies. The disparate goals of the heterogeneous Afghan groups were then aided and strengthened by a host of international sponsors, each supporting their tribal proxies in order to further their own ethnically-oriented or foreign policy objectives. Quite apart from all other drug producing nations, it is precisely the independent goals of the heterogeneous and conflicting tribes, which have included the self-serving, short-term benefits of opium and heroin, versus the needs and aims of the nation-state, to which Afghanistan owes its current place as the world’s leader in narcotics production and smuggling.

The cultivation of the poppy plant (*papaver somniferum*), and its extract, opium, has existed since at least 3400 B.C. in Mesopotamia, where it is known to have been an important agricultural commodity of the Sumerians. Along with agriculture itself, opium production

spread throughout Eurasia (Booth 15-16). By the sixteenth century A.D., poppy cultivation was concentrated, along with several other global locations, throughout the temperate mountains and plateaus of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, a region which came to be called the "Golden Crescent" (251). Although grown as a crop, opium's consumption was limited to use primarily as a folk remedy until the colonial era, when Dutch and English merchants began its commercialization. Opium became the central component of their "triangular trade" strategy to supply the drug to an ever-growing addicted population in China (McCoy 195). During the eighteenth century, the British established opium production in India as far west as the Northwest Frontier Province in what is today Pakistan, home to the Pashtun tribes.

Having become conscious of the debilitating effects of narcotics to both the individual and society, the League of Nations adopted international restrictions on the production and use of opium and its derivative, heroin (200). Seven to ten times stronger than the opium-derived alkaloid, morphine and heroin were first synthesized in 1874 by chemically reacting morphine base with the precursor chemical acetic anhydride, producing diacetyl morphine. In 1898, German chemist Heinrich Dreser was working at Bayer Laboratories, famous for aspirin, came up with a name for the awe-inspiringly powerful painkiller based on the German word *heroisch*, meaning heroic. It would, henceforth, be called heroin (Booth 77).

Despite the League of Nations' decree and the preceding Harrison Narcotics Act passed by U.S. Congress in 1914, organized crime, itself highly ethnic in its make-up, recognized the incredible profitability of heroin. According to McCoy, "In their trafficking, criminal syndicates would increasingly ignore the odorous, bulky opium and concentrate on a comparatively new derivative" (202). Thus began a new chapter in the struggle by governments not only to rid society of a man-made scourge, along with its suppliers, but also to attempt the eradication of its

progenitor, the poppy plant. In contemplating the futility of eradicating opium in a world filled with proto-addicts, McCoy states:

The persistent role of opiates as folk medicine and recreational euphoric during the last millennium raises some doubts about the possibility of effecting its eradication. Through interaction with opiate receptors in the brain, opium and heroin may well have an inherent biological logic that makes their mass abuse a likelihood at most times, in most societies where supply is readily available. Historically, every society that has been introduced to opium as a commercial euphoric has consumed the entire available supply.

(195)

Booth goes even further in propounding the socio-botanical theory of why the poppy plant produces opium alkaloid: "...the plant has developed opium simply to ensure humans maintain it in cultivation, an elaborate and incredibly ingenious example of symbiosis" (5).

The twentieth century has demonstrated, in various locations throughout the world, that addiction to opiates can affect not just the individual, but societies through their dependence upon the perceived socio-economic benefits of opium cultivation and heroin production. This is no more clearly exhibited than present-day Afghanistan where, although not a "national" policy, has become a tribal and regional habituation.

In 2004 Afghanistan set yet another new record for opium production, continuing its escalation over the past 25 years in the amount of hectareage under cultivation, as well as in opium gum production. At 4,950 metric tons of opium produced in 2004, Afghanistan dwarfed its nearest competitor nation, Burma, which harvested only 292 metric tons. At a near ten-to-one conversion rate, Afghanistan's potential heroin yield has been calculated at a staggering 582 metric tons. Moreover, were it not for significant crop losses due to disease and drought during

2004, Afghanistan could have produced 9,715 tons of opium and over 1,000 tons of heroin (INCSR 267). Once confined to a handful of remote areas, the cultivation of opium has spread to all 32 provinces of the nation. According to Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan supplies more than 75 percent of the heroin in the global market and more than 95 percent of the European market. Profits from the drug trade are the equivalent of 60 percent of Afghanistan's GDP" (2-3). Clearly, the narcotics trade has superseded all other forms of legitimate commerce in a brief period of time. Even then, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, admitted in September 2004, "rather than getting better, it's gotten worse. There is a potential for drugs overwhelming the institutions – a sort of narco-state" (B. Rubin 2).

In 1978, the year before the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, opium production had remained fairly constant at approximately 200 metric tons per year, all of which was consumed locally (INCSR 268). The country was self-sufficient in food production and, in fact, exported US \$100 million annually in legitimate agricultural products (B. Rubin 2). As a result of the Soviet counter-insurgency strategy during their occupation of the country, Afghanistan's fragile economic capacity was shattered, as was its access to foreign exchange. Rubin notes: "Opium production supplied this much needed currency and also served as collateral for loans necessary for food and life cycle obligations" (3).

Following the defeat of the occupying Soviet military machine by the *Mujahidin*, a highly-fractionous and heterogeneous group which coalesced only to fight a common enemy, its commanders, with support from anti-communist foreign powers, grew in stature and power within their tribes and regions. Again, according to Rubin: "Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989, the country's territorial administration was increasingly

captured by or subcontracted to autonomous commanders" (3). In 1990, following a decade of guerilla war, opium production had soared to 1,570 metric tons (3).

With the waning and elimination of national coercive capacities in Afghanistan during the twentieth century, be they colonial or communist, social forces at the tribal level became unleashed. Alfred McCoy writes that: "Moreover, the transition beyond the last of these coercive regimes, communism, allowed a recrudescence of primordial political forces – religion, ethnicity and regionalism – that further stimulated Asia's opium production" (193). Rooted in all three of these primeval predilections, combined with a "Silk Route" instinct in trade, it was then the economic opportunism of the tribe, as directed by its chieftain or warlord, that engendered deeper engagement in the drug trade.

The plac, called Afghanistan, is truly a mosaic of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. For few countries in the world is it more true that geography determines history, politics and the nature of a people. In Taliban, Ahmed Rashid writes: "Afghanistan's geo-strategic location on the crossroads between Iran, the Arabian Sea and India and between Central Asia and South Asia has given its territory and mountain passes a significance since the earliest Aryan invasions 6,000 years ago" (7). Wave upon wave of migrating peoples and invading armies, including Greeks, Persians, Kushans, Mongol hordes and, more recently, British and Russian interlopers, has resulted in a deposition of groups of people with distinct ethnicities, physical features and languages (Ewans 3). It proved to be a complex mix that was to make Afghan nation-building extremely difficult (Rashid 9-10). Indeed, the world has yet to witness the complete subjugation of clan and tribe to an Afghan central authority.

In a fascinating account of the Afghans, and their relationship to authority, British East India Company representative Mountstuart Elphinstone, on a mission to the Afghan court in

1809, wrote, "...there is reason to fear that the societies into which the nation is divided, possess within themselves a principle of repulsion and disunion, too strong to be overcome, except by such a force as, while it united the whole into one solid body, would crush and obliterate the features of every one of the parts." (Ewans 29). In 1880, while on assignment to Kabul by the British Army, Surgeon Major H.W. Bellew described the political situation in Afghanistan, which would prove prescient and accurate throughout the following century:

The enquiry will at the same time make clear to the reader the prime causes of the anarchy and instability which have characterized the history of the country ever since its emergence from a position of subordination to its neighboring empires on the side of Persia and India respectively, to one of absolute independence under native sovereigns – causes which owe their origin to the diversity of race and the antagonism of tribal interests among a heterogeneous and barbarous people, who have been only brought together as a nationality by the accident of position and the bond of a common religion (11).

Afghanistan in its modern form owes its demarcation to the nineteenth century competition and expansion of the British, Russian and Persian empires. The 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention formally ended the "Great Game" and established Afghanistan's role as a buffer state between British India and Russian holdings in Central Asia (M. Rubin 2). The Hazaras, generally inhabiting the center of the country, represent about 19% of the overall population. By their distinctive facial features, there can be no doubt that they are of Mongol origin. They also belong to the minority Shia sect within Islam. For these two reasons, the Hazaras occupy the lowest level in the social order and have withstood centuries of persecution

within the country (Bellew 114). In northern and western Afghanistan, the Uzbeks, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and others comprise the rest (Rashid 10).

Tribal divisions further compound the Afghan vortex. The Pashtuns are divided among the Durrani, Ghilzai, Waziri, Khattak, Afridi, Mohmand, Yusufzai, Shinwari, and numerous smaller tribes. In turn, each of these tribes is divided into sub-tribes. Such clan, sub-tribe, and tribal divisions greatly contribute to already intense rivalries and divisions. Michael Rubin further illustrates the problem: "The fact that most identifiable Afghan groups have co-linguists, co-ethnics, or co-religionists across national boundaries became a catalyst for the nation's collapse, as well as a major determinant in the coalition-building during both the years of Soviet occupation and post-liberation struggle" (2). This has been exemplified by the Pashtuns, who have traditionally looked eastward to Pakistan, while the Persian-speakers of Herat have looked westward to Iran. The Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen have more in common with their brethren in the Central Asian States than with their "countrymen" in Kandahar (Rashid 210-211). Having never developed a coercive, or even supportive, central authority within Afghanistan, the tribal system became and remained of central salience (Maley 709).

Tribal leaders, or warlords in many cases, dispensed land, credit, education and order within their spheres of influence and power. In a war-torn society with poor infrastructure, opium production became increasingly attractive to the various tribes. As a non-perishable, low-weight, high-value product, it was ideally suited as both a cash commodity and a form of currency. Moreover, as an annual crop with a relatively guaranteed market, opium provided security that other crops, such as fruits and vegetables, could not offer (B. Rubin 4). In a country where 70 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, drugs represent not only a lucrative, but also reliable, source of livelihood (Felbab-Brown 3). However, the United Nations

Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that only one percent of the eventual profits from opium and its derivatives end up in the hands of farmers. Owning the land, providing the seed, lending *salaam*, or credit, as well as taking two-thirds of the harvest, it is the tribal chieftain or warlord who profits, not the sharecropper, who grows more dependent should his crop fail (3-4). Further still, it is the tribal leader who imposes *zakat*, or tax, ranging up to twenty percent on his serf's production, transportation and distribution of opium.

According to Felbab-Brown, "Regional warlords reap vast benefits from drug production, threatening Afghanistan's fragile security environment. With profits in the tens of millions of dollars, local strongmen can easily finance their militias..." (3). She adds that, "Belligerent groups such as warlords, local terrorists and insurgents generally profit in one of three ways: taxing production or processing, providing protection for traffickers and taxing them for this service, or engaging in money laundering" (4). But unlike a cartel-style oligopoly like the Colombia-based cocaine industry, Afghanistan's opium industry behaves largely as a competitive industry, reflective of tribal-based objectives. Even in the face of falling opium prices due to overproduction and rapid expansion into heroin refining within the country, there is no OPEC-style attempt to institute "national" limits to increase profitability (B. Rubin 9). Clearly, this competition by ethnic groups to produce and traffic opiates into and through their surrounding co-ethnic countries in order to militarize or strengthen individual tribal autonomies has caused further fragmentation of the nation and weakened the state.

At the head of every tribe or clan, of course, is a *Khan*, a *Malek* or an *Emir* – a leader. Many of these tribal or clan leaders, throughout protracted guerilla warfare against the Soviets and against themselves, evolved into warlords. Rashid writes that "Ever since 1980, all of the *Mujahidin* warlords had used drug money to help fund their military campaigns and line their

own pockets...Publicly they refused to admit that they indulged in drug trafficking, but always blamed their *Mujahidin* rivals for doing so" (119). Opium was, by far, the greatest single source of wealth and power leveraged by the warlords, in the name of tribe and religion. It also annealed the tribe versus tribe provincialism throughout the country in the name of individual, yet disparate, goals. Moreover, it was the warlords, with their links to co-ethnic organized crime outside of Afghanistan, who were in the position to import acetic anhydride and other chemicals necessary for the production of heroin in their laboratories (B. Rubin 10).

The most prominent of the warlords catapulted themselves into regional *Mujahidin* commanders following the Soviet invasion of 1979. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Ghilzai Pashtun from Northern Afghanistan, led an Islamist organization and militia that was also a favorite recipient of Pakistani and CIA support. Based in Nangarhar Province, one of Afghanistan's three main opium cultivation regions, he became heavily involved in heroin refining and trafficking (Ewans 154). Working through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the CIA began supplying covert arms and funding to Afghan forces, notably the *Hezb-i-Islami* party under Hekmatyar. As they gained control over liberated areas within Afghanistan, the Islamic guerrillas pressed supporters to grow opium as revolutionary tax and processed it into heroin in numerous clandestine laboratories along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (McCoy 209).

Peter Dale Scott, in his book, Drugs, Oil and War, argues that "By providing funds for Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a drug trafficker selected for support by Pakistani intelligence, the CIA helped propel Hekmatyar into becoming, for a while, the largest heroin trafficker in Afghanistan and perhaps the world" (27). In the subsequent years, opium production soared in the Afghan-Pakistan Golden Crescent (29).

Seeming to arise out of nowhere at the end of 1994, the Taliban movement, led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, or "Commander of the Faithful" as he would come to be called, brought relative peace and security to the Pashtun South. Warring tribal groups were crushed and their fiefdom-controlling warlords hanged, the heavily-armed population was disarmed and the roads were opened to facilitate the lucrative smuggling trade between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia (Rashid 1). By then, Afghanistan's opium output had risen to 3,416 metric tons (INCSR 268). The Taliban struck a chord with the Pashtun populace, which had grown weary of endemic criminality and factionalism, and increasingly discontent of the growing power in the Tajiks and Uzbeks in the North. The Taliban were welcomed, despite their harsh and despotic version of Islam (Ewans 184). But as Ewans noted: "Before long, however, it all turned sour. Far from outlawing the drug trade, the Taliban came to profit from it immensely" (184).

Even though forbidden by the Koran, the Taliban sanctioned the production of opium because it was consumed by *kafirs*, or unbelievers, in the West" (Rashid 118, M. Rubin 10). Rashid states: "They began to collect an Islamic tax called *zakat* on all dealers moving opium. According to the Koran, Muslims should give 2.5 percent of their disposable income as *zakat* to the poor, but the Taliban had no religious qualms in collecting 20 percent of the value of a truckload of opium as *zakat*. Alongside this, individual commanders and provincial governors imposed their own taxes to keep their coffers full and their soldiers fed. Some of them became substantial dealers in opium or used their relatives to act as middlemen" (118).

The Taliban metastasized and eventually controlled nearly all of Afghanistan, with the exception of a small corner of the northeast under the control of the Northern Alliance. Their brand of government was as much Pashtun tribal code as Islamist fanaticism (M. Rubin 7). The

taxes on opium and heroin exports became the mainstay of Taliban income and their war economy. In 1995, the United Nations Office on Drug Control estimated that Pakistan-Afghanistan drug exports were earning some \$1.35 billion per year for the Taliban. By 1998, heroin exports had doubled in value to \$3 billion per year (Rashid 124).

In July 2000, following a record-setting year of nearly 4,600 metric tons (INCSR 268), Mullah Omar issued a decree banning all cultivation of opium in Afghanistan. The following year, after the growing season, the United Nations certified that, for those areas of the country under the control of the Taliban, the imposed ban resulted in a near total elimination of opium (Scott 44). The Taliban's stated purpose was to solicit legitimate international assistance, however according to Scott, "because the Taliban held substantial reserves and wished to drive up prices" (44), prices which, at a 20 percent tax rate, substantially benefited the tribal and religious expansion of the Taliban.

Allied against the Taliban were two regional warlords from the North, Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek, and Berhanuddin Rabbani, the Tajik. Together, along with a contingent of Hazaras and others, they constituted the Northern Alliance. They represented all that stood in the way of the Taliban's total domination of the country. Scott notes that in 2001, "[America's] drug proxy allies...responded to the Taliban ban on opium cultivation in 2000 by tripling output in their section of northeastern Afghanistan" (33). Prior to 2000, the Northern Alliance warlords had controlled less than 5 percent of the Afghan opium traffic, compared to the Taliban's 75-80 percent. But, beginning in 2001, Dostum and Rabbani filled the void in an effort to capitalize upon an opportunity for large profits in opium and heroin production to support their ethnic militias. Scott adds, "a rising tide of narcotics – both opium and heroin refined from it – was

flooding out of the northeast corner of Afghanistan under the control of the Northern Alliance" (33).

Following the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, the U.S. military crushed the Taliban's hold on Afghanistan within a matter of weeks. However, farmers throughout the country began immediately replanting opium, often at the behest of local commanders (44). Scott points out that "The crop augured the return of warlordism to Afghanistan – regional commanders and armies, financed by the opium in their area, jealously refused to relinquish such a lucrative source to a central government. Thus there could be a revival of the vicious internecine feuds that took so many civilian lives in the 1990s after the Soviet withdrawal" (44). As has been seen, Afghanistan continued its addiction to opium cultivation, reaching an incredible 4,950 metric tons within three years, and flooding the region, and the world, with cheap, pure heroin.

Exacerbating the ethnic, regional and sectarian factionalism within Afghanistan, foreign powers, reminiscent of the "Great Game," enmeshed themselves in the country by supporting proxy groups with financial and military assistance commensurate with their own objectives. Although this cross-border intervention by Afghanistan's neighbors existed before 1979, it was the Soviet invasion which induced massive, new assistance by the United States, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia to the *Mujahidin*, via their commander, or warlords (Rashid 197). The international largesse was funneled directly through the various warlords, which not only promoted Islamism and fractiousness within the *Mujahidin*, but strengthened the warlord's power and influence in the trafficking of heroin (M. Rubin 7).

Pakistan, through their ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), mainly supported seven *Mujahidin* groups, mostly Pashtun and sympathetic to Pakistani goals, the most important being

the Islamic insurgence in Kashmir (Ewans 154). Their favorite was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who was by 1980 already a significant heroin trafficker working in collaboration with fellow-Pashtun transporters and distributors in Pakistan (M. Rubin 7). United States' support to the *Mujahidin* commanders tended to utilize the existing channels and alliances of the ISI, further strengthening warlords such as Hekmatyar, Rabbani and Dostum (Rashid 198).

Saudi Arabia matched the United States dollar for dollar in their support to the *Mujahidin*, but chose those commanders sympathetic to their Wahhabist brand of Islam, which included the most radical and uncompromising of them all, Hekmatyar (Ewans 154). Moreover, Saudi Arabia fomented fundamentalist Islamism and factionalism through their funding and support of hundreds of *madrassas*, or religious schools, throughout the region. These *madrassas* became a breeding ground for fanatical warriors who would pour into Afghanistan to first fight the Soviets and, later, the Northern Alliance on behalf of the Taliban (Rashid 201).

Iran initially only provided assistance to their fellow Shia, in particular, the Hazaras. But in 1988, with the withdrawal of the Soviet Union imminent, Iran saw the need to strengthen the multiple Hazara parties and leaders even further in order to assure their inclusion in a post-Soviet Afghan government. But fearing a Sunni-Pashtun dominated government in Kabul, Tehran began financing Rabbani and his fellow Tajiks. Although not Shia, "they did originate from the same race and speak the same language" (200).

Soon after the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan, civil war broke out along tribal, regional and sectarian lines. With the exception of the United States (for which it has been criticized), those mentioned nations, along with new ones in Central Asia, continued their patronage and assistance to the heterogeneous groups and warlords, all vying for supremacy within Afghanistan. And it was during this time that heroin exports continued their meteoric rise.

Various academic and governmental theories have attempted to define the determinant factors in Afghanistan's explosive growth in the worldwide drug industry during the past twenty-five years. These include: poverty, lack of alternative crops, economic conditions and Western demand for heroin, among others (INCSR 268). Although clearly being influential, they alone cannot explain the expansive scope of the problem in Afghanistan, for these factors have also been present in other opium production zones across the planet without generating the magnitude exhibited in this diverse nation. Further, it has been argued that Afghanistan owes its burgeoning production to the "balloon effect," or rather, the migration of cultivation and production from Iran and Pakistan due to effective governmental eradication in those countries (INCSR 269). Again, a contributing factor in the equation, but one which does not explain how production levels in Afghanistan rapidly dwarfed all previously-combined totals of both of its neighbors. Lastly, it has become fashionable to ascribe Afghanistan's narcotics situation to "blowback," or unintended consequences, caused by CIA meddling in the nation. Peter Dale Scott theorized that, "In the same period that U.S. interest in Afghanistan surged, Afghanistan became the world's major heroin source" (31). Although Scott's argument that, relative to U.S. foreign policy, "drug control evidently became subordinated to larger strategic goals" (33) is true insofar as America's role in the country, he clearly demonstrates both an exaggerated belief in the efficacy of the CIA and a dearth of understanding of the preexisting and exploited primordial forces at play in Afghanistan.

The explosive growth of the opium and heroin industry in Afghanistan, which came to dominate the nation's economic base, has fundamentally been driven by tribalism. A tribalism owing its origination and endurance to the country's geography and history, then annealed by warlords in pursuit of conquest, autonomy and power, and, finally, strengthened by international

benefactors and champions of singular tribal, ethnic or religious-based factions. In spite of a new, multi-ethnic government which has sought the support of warlords through inclusion, the habituation of Afghan society to both tribalism and the opium economy remains a considerable challenge. To reverse the historically recent explosion of Afghan narcotics, it will require nothing less than the usurpation and supplanting of the autonomous tribes and their warlords with a strong, central authority, something which has never truly existed in Afghanistan. A functional national government will need to provide both a coercive, as well as a socially-supportive force throughout the country, not just in Kabul. The future of Afghanistan will be determined by its ability to control the trafficking and production of drugs. It will be these factors that will decide if Afghanistan will be a viable nation or a narco-state.

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